

about head and neck cancer

Head and neck cancer is a broad name for any type of cancer that is found in your head or neck region. These areas include your mouth, lips, throat, larynx (voice box), sinuses and nasal cavity.

At Cancer Care of Western New York, we are committed to providing the latest in radiation treatment technology. For example, we have more experience with RapidArc Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy (IMRT) than any other facility in the area. We believe that having this state-of-the-art equipment makes a real difference in the quality of care we provide to all of our patients.

Your Head and Neck

These types of cancers can affect your common everyday activities, such as eating, talking and even breathing. At Cancer Care of Western New York, we have experience helping patients and their families adjust to any lifestyle changes resulting from treatment and side effects.

Types of Head and Neck Cancer

Laryngeal Cancer—found in the upper, middle or lower part of your larynx, near your vocal cords.

Lip and Oral Cavity Cancer—these types of cancer can affect the inside of your mouth, cheeks, gums, and parts of your tongue.

Oropharyngeal Cancer—occurs in your tonsils, on the side and back of your throat, and the back of your tongue.

Risk Factors

Tobacco and excessive alcohol use can put you at risk for all types of these cancers. Additional risk factors include exposure to sunlight, being infected with HPV (human papillomavirus), being male, not eating enough fruits and vegetables, and chewing or drinking certain stimulants.

Signs and Symptoms

A sore throat and changes in your voice are two symptoms associated with head and neck cancer. Other sores and lumps—especially ones that do not go away—may also be signs. Additional symptoms include:

Laryngeal Cancer

- Ear pain
- Problems with swallowing

Lip and Oral Cavity Cancer

- Problems with chewing or swallowing
- Red or white patches in your mouth and surrounding areas, or thickening of your mouth, gums or lips
- Pain, numbness, bleeding or swelling
- Loose teeth or dentures
- Previous lip or oral cavity cancer





Oropharyngeal cancer

- Problems swallowing
- Pain in your ear or behind your breastbone
- Unexplained weight loss
- Coughing

Screening and Diagnosis

Your physician may start with a physical exam, during which he or she will examine your head and neck for any signs of cancer. Following a physical exam, your doctor may send you for some tests, including an X-ray, an MRI, a CT scan, or a PET scan, all of which can help pinpoint any areas of concern.

Some types of head and neck cancer can also be diagnosed through a variety of additional tests, including biopsies, which involve collecting a tissue sample. Your physician may then perform an endoscopy (using a scope to see inside your body), and a barium swallow (X-rays taken after you swallow a special liquid to further evaluate your condition.).

Treatment Options

Head and neck cancer is treated differently depending on the site involved and the extent of the disease.

Surgery. Surgery may be part of the management of your head and neck cancer. The surgeon will evaluate the extent of disease through imaging studies and a thorough physical examination. The surgery involves removal of the tumor and may involve removal of part or the entire site of disease. For example, patients with larynx cancer (voice box) may have part or all of their larynx removed. Head and neck cancers have a tendency to spread to the lymph nodes on either side of your neck. The surgeon may do a neck dissection, which removes these lymph nodes.

Radiation. Radiation is part of a curative approach for several head and neck cancers. It may be used alone or in combination with chemotherapy. Sometimes radiation is used before or after surgery. The head and neck region is a complex area involving several organs. Your radiation may involve sophisticated IMRT techniques to spare these normal structures from unnecessary radiation exposure. We highly recommend that you quit smoking before you start radiation therapy, as radiation for head and neck cancers has been shown to be more effective in patients who do not smoke.

Chemotherapy. Chemotherapy may be used along with radiation. A medical oncologist will help evaluate if you are an appropriate candidate for chemotherapy. If you are a candidate, the chemotherapy may be given through the veins or in pill form.

Your physician and the Patient Advocates at Cancer Care of Western New York can answer any additional questions you may have, and help you determine which treatment is right for you.